ARTICLE APPEARED
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U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT
22 April 1985

"It Didn't Have to End This Way"

Wendell S. Merick, who covered the Vietnam War for U.S.News & World Report, *was one of the last Americans lifted out of Saigon only hours before the Communist forces took over. In the following report, he records his memories of the final retreat.*

If looks could kill, I never would have made it out of Saigon aboard that overloaded American helicopter on April 29, 1975.

All that day, I confronted mobs of desperate South Vietnamese who at best felt abandoned by America—and, at worst, betrayed. Thoughts about what it all meant would come later. On that day, all that mattered was getting out.

I had already been turned back at the airport by the threat of shelling, and had ruled out the river port, when I turned to the last escape route, the American Embassy compound.

An evacuation bus dumped me and some colleagues across the street. Between us and escape were hundreds of screaming Vietnamese waving documents and handfuls of cash in an effort to get into the compound, where helicopters were ferrying the select few to ships in the South China Sea.

There was no easy way through the crowd. It was becoming frantic at the sound of departing helicopters. Who knew which one would be the last?

We started making our way toward the fenced compound. I felt a hand slip deep inside my left pocket where I clutched my money and U.S. passport. Saigon's notorious pickpockets were at work even now.

I pulled out the stranger's hand and moved slowly toward a strapping U.S. Marine atop an overturned guard hut who was helping Americans over the embassy wall. In a display of brute strength, he lifted Americans by their arms and literally threw them over the wall. I made for the Marine.

It had all come so fast—the panic, the evacuation, the fall of Saigon.

For so long, everyone had held on to the illusion that everything was normal. Restaurants were busy; jewelry and appliance stores jammed. Public utilities operated. Even traffic jams were at a minimum. All's well, I might have thought. But I knew better.

Local newspapers were detailing the North Vietnamese onslaught driving south, pushing thousands of terrified refugees before it. Pleiku fell, and then Hue, places where Americans had stood and died by the hundreds.

Nha Trang fell, with the desperation of the last flight out captured by a single photograph that showed a brawny American in an aircraft doorway punching a desperate Vietnamese grasping for a flight to freedom.

A nation lost. I remember thinking that it didn't have to end this way. The Vietnamese had the power to save their country, certainly parts of it, from a Communist triumph. Their soldiers weren't cowards. But the leadership was so corrupt that the foot soldiers were not about to get their heads blown off for crooked generals. Their leaders let them down; the price was their country.

It was a war that America lost, too, and didn't have to. Had Washington made some simple military decisions early enough, it might have stopped aggression from the North. I was angry because the United States had been not so much disgraced as embarrassed despite all those good intentions and despite lost American lives.

Perhaps it could be traced to blindness among top-level U.S. officials in Saigon. Six days before the fall, I sat dumbfounded at dinner as the Central Intelligence Agency station chief argued that the Hungarian truce delegation was working out a compromise with Hanoi so that South Vietnam could avoid surrender.

U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin was just as adamant, rejecting what seemed the virtual certainty of defeat. The day before evacuation, an American political officer was telling me that the U.S. Embassy would remain open after North Vietnam took over.

The next morning, Communist rockets raining down on Saigon finally shattered Martin's illusions and forced him to concede the end was at hand.

The miscalculations did a real disservice: The U.S. ever since has been wary of sending men abroad on any kind of mission, no matter how valid.

In the end, what sticks in your memory are those you tried to help. I had word that my Vietnamese assistant had been asking for me at the embassy, hoping that she and her family might get aboard an outbound plane. She left no address. I didn't find her. I still wonder where she is.

I did help Duong Thien Dong, a former assistant in the magazine's Saigon bureau who served as a combat surgeon with a Vietnamese airborne unit. Dong and his family were flown to Guam on the airlift run by CBS bureau chief Brian Ellis and embassy public-affairs chief John Hogan.

What I didn't realize was that Dong's wife was pregnant. Her son was born months later in the U.S. and was named after me. Poor kid, going through life as "Bud Merick Dong."

But these thoughts came later, in safety, after that final day. I reached up to the Marine by the embassy wall. He helped me scramble into the compound as the mob screamed in vain behind me.

Two hours later, I was airborne in a U.S. helicopter, and Saigon's desperation was falling away beneath me.

We headed for the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Hancock* waiting in the South China Sea. We gathered in the ship's mess that night, but there was little said. It seemed as if those of us who had been in Saigon that last day had nothing to add to a conversation about Vietnam.